

RANK AND FILE or BROAD LEFT:

DEMOCRACY versus BUREAUCRACY



A short history of the Building Worker Group

Produced and published by

Colin Roach Centre/Resistance

£1.50

Why this pamphlet is important

Colin Roach Centre members are pleased to publish this history of the Building Worker Group. We do so at a crucial time for trade unionists and the 75% of workers who are not in a union. Trade union struggles are at an all time low, unions seem incapable of resisting the Government and employers' attacks which are taking place on all sections of the working class.

Many workers, especially the young and the unemployed, have little or no experience of trade unions. A whole generation are being brought up in workplaces with poor working conditions, low rates of pay and an insecure future. This is the case not only in England, Scotland and Wales, but also internationally. On building sites workers are being injured, maimed and killed.

If workers are to successfully fight back then the history of past and present struggles needs to be analysed and used. The Building Worker Group is the oldest and most successful Rank and File group in England, Scotland and Wales. Its history, its policies and its tactics need discussing by workers so that a new generation can enter struggles with an awareness of the forces ranged against them and how they can be resisted. We hope that this pamphlet will be widely read and discussed. Comments, favourable or otherwise, on the contents should be sent to the publishers.

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Rank and file or broad left: democracy versus bureaucracy

A short history of the Building Worker Group

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Foreword

I was asked by the Colin Roach Centre if I would use a discussion document I wrote in April 1992 entitled "Rank and File Organisation - the Broad Left - the Unions and the Joint Sites" and re-write this as a short history of the R&F Building Worker Group.

Given that the history of workers industrial struggles actually written by workers who participated in and helped fashion these is an absolute rarity in all literary circles, then I jumped at the chance and thank the Colin Roach Centre for encouraging and enabling me to do so. It also helps combat the industrial and political isolation imposed on me by the blacklist with the economic and social constraints this brings. Many many years of blacklisting.

In order to give this short history, which also touches quite a few other construction workers' struggles, as much authenticity as possible and to enable the reader to politically judge what is written in the light of what has happened since I have written it in the grammatical tense as it was in April 1992 and the vast bulk of words are exactly the same as in the original document.

As such the majority of this pamphlet is located in a militant building workers' struggle and arose out of the need I felt to intervene in this with a written R&F perspective when it became increasingly obvious that the political struggle at the heart of Joint Sites was between those of a R&F persuasion as represented by the 'Building Worker Group' and those who preferred a broad left approach - as most clearly represented by the Militant Tendency, as it was known then, and the Socialist Workers Party. It was clear that the result of the political struggle would determine the success or failure for the Joint Sites - or at least any chance of success.

In the last chapter I provide a summary of subsequent developments and the situation which exists today.

I supply the words in this history but above all it is one of a truly collective struggle over a period of 21 years and it is one that proves the ability of rank and file workers and a Rank and File Organisation to survive against all the odds.

Brian Higgins, Secretary of the Building Worker Group.



A USEFUL HANDBOOK...

Introduction

The action taken in London in recent months and the formation of the Joint Sites has undoubtedly been the most important and significant action by, and development among, rank and file building workers since the 'Laings Lock Out Committee' of October 1985 - April 1986, when anti-union laws and a High Court injunction were openly and successfully defied by a group of building workers, members of UCATT, in London.

The formation and struggles of the Joint Sites has given some of us considerable hope and inspiration but has also forced us to take another look at Rank and File Organisation in the light of these developments, past experiences, the state of the building industry, unions and the labour movement today. How can a R&F organisation relate and apply itself to both the possibilities and problems that have emerged?

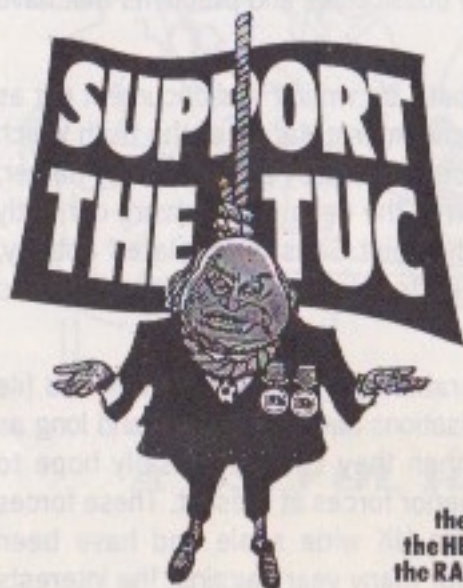
I also emphasise here and now that I am writing this document not as some sort of absolute or dogmatic interpretation of the truth which has to be either accepted or rejected in total by all who read it. Rather, I am writing this as a contribution to the debates which are currently taking place and will grow as the Joint Sites, and related activity, develops and intensifies the need to take collective decisions and action arising out of this.

There is also the not inconsiderable fact that unless rank and file building workers and their organisations have a total plan and long as well as short term objectives then they cannot possibly hope to succeed against what are far superior forces at present. These forces are much better organised on a UK wide scale and have been collectively planning and acting for many years against the interests of building workers, on site, and in the unions.

I write here of the employers, the state (i.e. the ruling class) and the political and trade union bureaucracies which are collectively and politically termed 'The Popular Front.'

This is also a political as well as industrial document. The massive political move (sorry stampede) to the right by the trade union and labour movement in the face of the prolonged Capitalist Offensive began under the Labour Government of 1974 -1979, but intensified when Thatcher came to power in 1979, and the corruption of democracy this has given rise to, in general, and particularly within the constructions unions (especially UCATT and EETPU) has had a devastating effect on site organisation and confidence.

The Joint Sites shows the very real potential, as did the miners' strike, to move away from this. This potential can be very quickly realised, but only, if all involved get it correct politically and industrially. It means we must not shirk the political struggle with the broad left for the sake of a false industrial peace.



**...AS THEY SUPPORTED
the MINERS, the SEAMEN,
the PRINTWORKERS, the FIREMEN,
the HEALTHWORKERS, the SHIPBUILDERS,
the RAILWORKERS, the COUNCILWORKERS...**

Rank and file organisation in construction

Capital R&F is used to distinguish it from the more general use of rank and file as in workers. Rank and File Organisation is a revolutionary political concept, bringing together the absolute need for revolutionary workers (i.e. those who believe in some reforms but who have no faith in parliament or parliamentary democracy and see the only road to working class emancipation in extra parliamentary political organisation and activity) - and reformist workers, (by far the majority, who feel the system can be reformed in favour of the working class via parliament and the established political parties and industrial organisations) - to counter the effects of a capitalist offensive in their specific workplaces and industries as well as the fact that it is the inherent nature of the trade union bureaucracy to reach unprincipled compromises and sell out workers' wages, jobs and conditions:

A united front Rank and File Organisation should be formed to meet the more immediate needs of workers in the workplaces, building sites in our case, and unions. Longer term policies and objectives are required to counter the ability of the employers to repeatedly come back at workers and claw back any gains made during periods of heightened class struggle, activity and organisation.

United front and independence

The main emphasis of any serious Rank and File Organisation must be on action and organisation, completely independent from the trade union and labour bureaucracy, around a set of agreed UNITED FRONT policies and objectives. Supporting workers in struggle is vital. Initiating and leading a few also!

By United Front we mean a minimum package of policies and principles which those in the united front can agree with and that will unite these

(usually more militant) workers and others (who will disagree socially and politically on some perhaps even many issues) in maximum action and organisation in a specific industry and union or unions. In our case this is the construction unions and industry. Of course, a united front Rank and File Organisation is open to all workers associated with a particular industry be they employed or unemployed or in a union or not. It will also endeavour, very much, to win the support of the more conventional forms of workers' rank and file organisations such as shop stewards committees and trade union branches.

Essentially, the united front maximises agreement and minimises differences.

A united front R&F organisation will take on board some of the more difficult social and political issues and adopt a principled working class united front position on these. This mainly develops over time.

It should cover these in their publications and some of their activities. Not to do so will inevitably lead to embarrassing walls of silence when workers (as some always do) ask the R&F organisation - where do we stand on this issue, that issue?

It is recognised that, in the short term, it is only the so called bread and butter issues which will get maximum support and unity in action from a majority of workers on site. However the R&F organisation should be the bridge between the more popular economic and democratic site issues and the more difficult but equally (some would say in the long term much more) important ones. I stress just as an example - what about the rights of the Irish, Scottish and Welsh people to self-determination? The whole of the UK could soon be overwhelmed by these questions.

Building Worker Group

Next, for the purposes of this section on R&F Organisation, I refer to the 'Building Worker' Group, which is the only organisation in the construction industry which has consistently adhered to United Front Rank and File principles and policies of organisation and activity since its formation in 1974/75. It has always been totally independent from the trades union and labour bureaucracies.

17½ - 18 years of struggle, often against the employers. Always against UCATT and TGWU officialdom! Mostly against tremendous adversity and in circumstances extremely unfavourable to R&F Organisation and activity.

The BWG was formed on the initiative of the International Socialists (IS) as a way of recruiting workers into the IS and to replace the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) as the main industrial influence on the revolutionary left.

The IS, and then the SWP as it became in 1977 recruited many workers in this phase but lost them just as quickly. In fact, the joke among building workers in the IS/SWP at that time was that they had a bigger turnover of labour than George Wimpey! They never did replace the CPGB. Not having the politics necessary to deal with the Capital Offensive, anti-union laws et al, the SWP moved rapidly towards supporting a Broad Left Industrial position and they are now in fact tailing the main broad left forces in the official trades union and labour movement. Meaning in fact they are an adjunct of and very subservient to these.

The R&F organisations formed in 1974/75 were in fact seen as nothing more than party fronts by the IS/SWP leadership. However those of us in the SWP at that time, who helped to form and build the 'Building Worker' Group in its early days, did so with a total commitment to the principle of the united front. We did not realise

the party front intentions of the SWP leadership as they quite carefully disguised it from their industrial militants.

Thus when the SWP wrongly diagnosed what to do in response to (what they determined was a downturn in workers' struggles and combativity but what some of us subsequently realised was and is) an intensified capitalist offensive they bureaucratically and dictatorially ordered all R&F Organisations to close down and for members to retreat to our geographical branches to await the (mythical) upturn. By the way, the miners' strike was some downturn!



At a meeting of the BWG in Manchester in July 1982, Tony Cliff of the SWP Central Committee, who had been invited by me to address the meeting and encourage us in our efforts, ordered us to close down the paper and group. We were astounded and very, very angry. Cliff was told the BW Group was a united front and as such was composed of and open to workers of varying political persuasions and thus it did not belong to the SWP and it never would, and neither the SWP or SWP members in the group had the authority to close it down. Nor did we want to work for this! He was told the way to respond when the going got tough was not to sound the retreat, as there is absolutely no credibility in this.

Rather, political and R&F Organisations should strive all the harder to strengthen their organisation and resolve and give a positive and definite alternative lead, with policies, to that of the craven capitulation and collaboration of the official trade union and labour movement. Otherwise you become part of this dungheap.

The meeting voted, with only one against, to keep the Building Worker paper and group going. In fact Cliff, who was considered by many (including himself!) to be among the foremost revolutionary political thinkers and leaders of that time, was politically routed by a group of 'rag, tag and bobtail' site and political militants.

Tony Cliff was reminded that the Building Worker Group had supported many struggles outside as well as in the building industry. We had also led many struggles in the industry, such as at Lawrences in London in 1974, Macinerney's in London and Henry Boot in Northampton in 1975. At Shanleys in Bedford in 1976 we organised a political strike in solidarity with public sector workers against the cuts.

The BW Group organised what must have been one of the most successfully and comprehensively organised sites in the UK, since the 1945 war, on Fairweathers in Clapham Junction, London. Three successful strikes were held on this site. Workers from many parts of London came to the stewards committee (which was organised deliberately to include Asian, Black and women workers) for advice and support.

BW meetings of 25-30 were regularly held in South London as well as in Central London. An example of the successful support given to other building workers was when the Fairweather workers and the BW Group picketed the Thames Barrier and forced Tarmac to reinstate a convener they had sacked on a site in Brixton.

The BW and Fairweather stewards committee called for and got mass picketing of a huge Wandsworth Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) job where two shop stewards had been sacked. Pickets came from as far away as Manchester. The stewards were reinstated. The Fairweather and related activity took place in 1977, 1978 and 1979. Flying pickets came up to Northampton in 1980 and closed down a large site which was part of the Symes Group of Companies.



Close down such an organisation, Cliff was asked? Fuck off, he was told. I was expelled from the SWP shortly after this for refusing to work for the closure of the Building Worker Group and paper. This was the highest political compliment the SWP can ever pay you!

Building Worker supporters took a brave stand on a Crouch job in London against the lump and gangster systems of employment. Two men were brutalised by a sub contractor's hit man for this brave stand. One was seriously injured and his health is still seriously impaired. Such are the risks sometimes associated with organising a union on site in the building industry. Struggles were also led in Milton Keynes, Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, and others too numerous to mention.



Laings Lock Out Committee

The culmination of all of this and undoubtedly the most important and significant struggle led by the Building Worker group and worth a separate mention was the 'Laings Lock Out Committee' of 1985/86 where our cumulative and collective experience was most thoroughly and seriously put to the test.

Our bricklaying gang, all BW supporters, were sacked by sub-contractors Jonoroy on a site in Surbiton in October 1985 on the instructions of Laing Homes, who were quite openly and blatantly operating the blacklist against us.

We went into immediate struggle. With our very limited numbers and resources it was obvious we would have to fight a guerrilla, hold the site we were on and hit and run, war with Laing and the Building Employers Confederation. We sought and got support from many industrial and political sources.

We formed the 'Laings Lock Out Committee'. We were so successful in our use of the flying picket tactic that we halted or severely restricted production on 8 sites in London. In all, we picketed 14 different sites. The outcome of this was Jonoroy (Laings actually) offered work on a Galliford site in Banstead in Surrey, ostensibly until the site in Surbiton was ready, or so we were told. We knew the employers would come back at us in the very short term. We had to put a picket on the Galliford job to get on it. We had to threaten a strike after we got on it to ensure they took on a hod carrier who was with us, but hadn't been at the beginning of the Lock Out.

They told us to go back to Surbiton as that site was ready. We went to Surbiton. We were told "there's no way Higgins and the others would work on a Laing site". Our picketing was restarted and stepped

up. We hit the British Library and Hays Wharf among others. The employers were shitting themselves.

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE
QUEEN'S BENCH DIVISION

1986 L. No. 142

BETWEEN:

LS
20 Feb 1986

LAING HOMES LIMITED	<u>First Plaintiff</u>
JOHN LAING SERVICES LIMITED	<u>Second Plaintiff</u>
LAING MANAGEMENT CONTRACTING LIMITED	<u>Third Plaintiff</u>
SOUTHERN BRICKLAYING LIMITED	<u>Fourth Plaintiff</u>
JOHN LAING PLC	<u>Fifth Plaintiff</u>
JOHN LAING CONSTRUCTION LIMITED	<u>Sixth Plaintiff</u>
- and -	
BRIAN HIGGINS	<u>First Defendant</u>
THOMAS WALSH	<u>Second Defendant</u>
DAVID LAVERY	<u>Third Defendant</u>
RAYMOND MILLS	<u>Fourth Defendant</u>
DAVID WILLIAMS	<u>Fifth Defendant</u>
JAMES WESTGAZE	<u>Sixth Defendant</u>

They took out a high court injunction against us which threatened us with two years in jail and fines of many hundreds of thousands of pounds if we did not stop picketing, meeting and even speaking about the Lock Out. The injunction was issued in February 1986.

We took a decision in line with official TUC, UCATT and TGWU policy at that time (though they always supported the anti-union laws in practice) and much more to the point in defence of the basic freedoms of the right to speak, meet and picket, to defy the injunction and carry on. We stepped up picketing, meeting and speaking.

In the months before the injunction was issued we had visited many workplaces, and rank and file trade union organisations, and had addressed many mass meetings. So much groundwork had been done

and many workers knew of and supported our struggle against the blacklist. However when the high court injunction was issued on the basis of the 1982 anti-union laws, the main issue then became the overt political one of the anti-union laws themselves. Thus, we stepped up our campaign on this basis and got a tremendous response from workplace after workplace, mass meeting after mass meeting. We had always gone and continued to go straight to the rank and file. To hell and the High Court with the bureaucracy!

An example of the kind of enthusiastic support we received was when I addressed a meeting of about 1,000 Islington DLO workers. Among them were bin men. They told us if we were put in jail (Pentonville was traditionally where they put 'political' prisoners in London, arising out of industrial disputes) then they would blockade Pentonville Road with their lorries until our release, as they had done for the 'Pentonville Dockers'. I addressed a meeting of 4,000 print workers. Again, there was tremendous support for our struggle against the anti-union laws. It was the same everywhere.

Needless to say this sort of support and the promise of political strike action by many thousands of workers, if we were jailed, gave us great inspiration and enabled us to carry on our struggle. No doubt, it gave the government and the High Court the opposite! We went to see the UCATT Executive Council and general secretary, A Williams at that time, and asked for their support, just for the record. Naturally they didn't give it to us but instead told us to give up our struggle. I told them they were a bunch of spineless, cringing, crawling, back-stabbing bastards and we were now in open defiance of them and the High Court. George Henderson, General Secretary of the TGWU construction section, did the same, as did those other spineless bastards at Tooley Street (TGWU construction section London Headquarters) to a man.

During the dispute I received open death threats from the employers - twice during official negotiations. It really is a nice industry to organise

in! They were told there would be no more Crouches (see earlier) and that if any of us or our families were harmed then the main employer Laing and its directors would be held physically and personally responsible and we would be avenged. No equivocation!

For two months we openly and successfully defied the High Court and the anti-union laws, a tremendous political victory which has immediate implications for today's struggles. However on the industrial front A Williams, the UCATT general secretary, in secret negotiations signed a document with the employers' national secretary which removed all official recognition from our dispute be it at Surbiton or anywhere else. We didn't have enough building workers involved to force a negotiated settlement outside of the official machinery, which is what it would have taken, and after six months of tremendously hard struggle we called off our struggle against the blacklist with the knowledge it will have to be fought another day. Hopefully not far off now.

However, we set London alight for six months and exposed the gangster system of employment in the industry. We gave hope to many building workers, we proved the anti-union laws and High Court could be successfully defied! We exposed the full corrupt depth to which P Kavanagh, the London regional secretary of the TGWU (Tooley Street), had sunk and forced the TGWU to sack him. Unfortunately, he is only the tip of a very huge corrupt official iceberg.

The Federation of Brick Contractors was formed as a result of our struggle; meaning the brutalisation of a physical nature would lessen but they would now, and do, court official union support and corrupt it horribly in the process to counter any repeat of the 'Laings Lock Out' type of action. Before and since the blacklist has kept quite a few of us off the sites. Some have been so demoralised with this, and the state of the unions and the left, that they have given up the struggle.

Update on Anti-Corruption Campaign

UCATT 1994 National Delegate Conference and after

Despite being unable to defeat Laings and the state forces it employed the Building Worker Group stayed in existence and much of our energy, some of which went into the Joint Sites, has been put into DLO's where we have some supporters and into taking a public stand against the nauseous corruption which has engulfed UCATT in recent years. We have exposed the most unsavoury facts and named the guilty along the way - with particular emphasis on the need for a further expose of 'The UCATT Inquiry' cover up. Just as well we did!

As we will see below the broad left have always displayed extreme sectarianism towards us. However a section knew they desperately needed our support against the (broad left!) UCATT Executive Council who were intent on taking UCATT into TGWU and they ensured that two of us in the BWG, Kenny Irvine and myself, were delegates to the 1994 UCATT National Delegate Conference. The broad left largely controlled the system for electing delegates to conference and still largely do! No deals were struck, we stood on a Building Worker Platform and emphasised we'd take this into the conference. And how!

We produced an anti-corruption special issue of the 'Building Worker' paper for the conference and it is no exaggeration to write we almost took the conference by storm. The banner headline of this paper was "Save UCATT, Sack the Executive Council".

In the spring of 1995, 87% of the UCATT members who voted supported the removal of the sitting full time Executive Council (EC) and for their replacement with a lay one. A tremendous vote and result and one which was enormously heartening for the BW Group. We do not claim sole responsibility for the removal of that EC but the vote proved we were very much in touch with the feelings of the vast

PAPER OF THE RANK AND FILE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Price 10p

Building Worker

FEBRUARY 1994

THE BUILDING WORKER AND CORRUPTION IN UCATT

In November 1993 the UCATT General Office, i.e. General Secretary and Executive Council, published a paper called 'Building Worker' 'The News Bulletin for UCATT Activists'. This is nothing short of outrageous and is an act of political piracy. The title used by the UCATT paper is gum and our paper and Group has been in existence since 1974 and continues to exist.

Differences

The first major difference between us and this official UCATT robbery and attempt to take over our title and mantle and thus to seriously confuse building workers, is that our paper, The Building Worker is a Rank and File paper for all construction workers, whether in a union or not. It is not just for UCATT activists.

The second difference is that we are in existence to offer a militant working class and industrial alternative to the creaking performance and the continual capitulation of all full time construction trade union officials to the employers on all issues of importance and substance. Not to make excuses and 'glid the lily' for these officials. The pirate UCATT edition of 'Building Worker' is clearly in existence to make it appear that we, The Rank and File Building Worker Group and paper, have been incorporated into official UCATT structures and activities. We can assure you this is most definitely not the case. Read on!!

We of course unequivocally condemn media attacks and any smear on UCATT which are clearly designed to undermine UCATT in particular and trade unionism in the construction industry in general.

However, the article in the 'pirate UCATT Edition' conveniently leaves out a few very important facts and details which make very clear the conduct of the UCATT General Secretary G. Brumwell, his Assistant J. Hardman and the Executive Council. In relation to The UCATT Inquiry and Hand Report of this, they are seriously undermining the credibility of UCATT and

trade unionism in the construction industry. This can only encourage media attacks on UCATT and help to undermine its credibility and will continue to do so until the General Secretary and Executive Council come clean on all matters relating to The UCATT Inquiry.

Executive Boast

They boast of the current leadership of UCATT commissioning 'this independent inquiry immediately on coming into office in 1991' and that an attack in the Daily Mirror 'fails to mention that reforms it recommended have long since been implemented'.

majority of UCATT members on this issue. Our campaign had put tremendous pressure on and exposed the EC and was partly responsible for their removal. Not bad for a tiny wee R&F Organisation. However, to show we have our feet planted very firmly on the ground and in political reality, we have warned all who read our literature, a change of personnel alone, be it lay or fulltime, essentially alters nothing. Only new policies and the struggle for these can alter things in favour of the rank and file and democracy.

The broad left in construction

popular front

I have written of the Building Worker Group in some detail. This is because very few know of our history and specific experiences. This is especially the case among the new group of militants emerging and what they hear will be very heavily prejudiced by the politics of those speaking about us.

This document also states very clearly where we come from and the experience we bring and can offer any emerging movements. I feel the real proof of any working class organisation is not so much in what it says but much more what it does in practice, in action. This is proof we mean what we say. We have learned many important lessons in our struggles and many years of existence. Many of them are vitally important for today and tomorrow. But what of the Broad Left?

The first thing to establish is that the main political and ideological difference between the Broad Left and Rank and File approach is that the broad left is entirely committed to putting pressure on left wing fulltime trade union officials and also political figures. These will then put pressure on the other union and political people. Who will then put pressure on the more 'liberal' employers, who will presumably put pressure on the other employers and this will be to the benefit of rank and file workers. In this sequence of events, of course, the employers have the real power and they use it to dominate and control all the others in the interest of their own greed and class.

This combination is known as the popular front approach, i.e. a popular front between bosses, politicians and union officials. This is, of course, completely to the detriment of rank and file workers, whereas the

R&F united front approach means organisation and action completely independent of any popular front and against this.

As this sounds largely theoretical and theory is proven in practice, what is the practice of the broad left? I give a few examples with a wee bit of their history included. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) essentially formulated and initiated this popular front/broad left approach and theory. They dominated earlier examples of this before their political decimation and disintegration.

In the mid-'60s to early '70s the CPGB initiated and controlled what they pretended was a Rank and File industrial organisation in the construction industry called 'THE BUILDERS CHARTER'. They quite cynically launched the Charter as a pseudo R&F organisation to attract workers to them and to use these workers as a 'stage army' to build and enhance the reputations of CPGB militants with a view to implementing the CPGB's real industrial strategy, which was winning and holding on to fulltime positions in the unions. Thus CPGB militants were elected into full time positions in UCATT on the basis of their reputations gained in the Builders Charter movement. There are plenty of other examples of 'militants', both as individuals and in political organisations, using workers' struggles to get a fulltime union position; but the CPGB were the main proponents of this in the building industry.

The 1972 National Building Workers Strike

The culmination of the Charter Movement and the most clear and worst example of the CPGB's cynicism was when they initiated and apparently controlled the 1972 (inter)national UK wide strike in the building industry. This strike won the highest percentage wage rise ever conceded in the history of the building industry, i.e. 'national' wage rise.

It could have been a lot higher and most importantly working conditions improved immeasurably. But the real price and popular front nature of the CPGB/Broad Left Leadership of the 'Charter' were

soon to be callously and brutally exposed. During the strike, sites were allowed to work where the employers conceded wage rises, the Charter thus breaking all rules and principles of working class solidarity. The Charter also agreed to ask the striking workers to forego desperately needed strike pay if the UCATT Executive Council would continue to give the strike its official backing. What a deal - imagine the signals these events sent to the employers and the British State!

Most damningly, a few months after the strike, tactically waiting till things had quietened down a bit, a state/employer conspiracy was mounted against some pickets in the North Wales and Shrewsbury areas.



SHREWSBURY

Whose conspiracy?

THE NEED FOR AN INQUIRY

A pamphlet by

DES WARREN

Price 46p

As a result of this, some pickets were sent to prison on trumped up charges. Among them were Des Warren, (a CPGB member!) and Ricky Tomlinson in UCATT and TGWU respectively. They served three and two years a piece - the longest sentences.

When the 'Shrewsbury Pickets' were arrested, during the trial and after the sentences, many sites and building workers came out on strike for their release from custody. They were told to go back to work by the 'Charter' leadership and fulltime officials of the unions.

They said it should be left to the UCATT and TGWU Executive Councils, who promptly left it to the Labour Party and TUC. They passed it to Roy Jenkins who was Home Secretary then. He left them in jail. Appeals were made to nice liberal employers and members of the ruling class. They stayed in jail.

Des Warren is now suffering from advanced Parkinson's Disease as a result of the drugs forcibly administered to him to subdue him while in prison. The broad left/popular front CPGB 'Charter' leadership were just as guilty of putting and keeping the pickets in jail as the union officials, the state, the employers. The popular front in action! Compare this with the Building Worker Group and the 'Laings Lock Out'.

Earlier Joint Sites

There was an earlier 'joint sites' in London in the later sixties to the mid-seventies. All activities and policies were subject to the main broad left consideration for and thus subservient to left trade union officials. Action was continually sabotaged and sacrificed because of this.

The Building Worker Group after its formation repeatedly made appeals to the earlier joint sites, and to the broad left in construction ever since, for the broad left and BW Group to join together in one united front Rank and File Organisation. We sought policy agreements in order to go forward to construction workers with these. It was hoped that the unity achieved would prove to the workers on sites and in the unions that we could still maintain our political differences and opinions but unite on specific policies and issues for maximum action and organisation. This could only inspire workers and would mean they would be much more likely to take a lead from such a united front, rather than one organisation saying and doing one thing and the other something else.

The Building Worker Group initiated united front campaigns from time to time and appealed to the broad left to join us in these. One was 'The UCATT Democracy Campaign' which was formed in February 1987 with the specific objective of countering and opposing the ballot rigging, and those responsible, which came to light in the elections for the UCATT EC in 1985. Dominic Hehir (CPGB at one time and darling of the left of) the broad left UCATT Regional Organiser in London resigned his fulltime position in protest at the ballot rigging, or so he said. He was actually manoeuvring for a more senior position in UCATT. He appeared on a 'UCATT Democracy Campaign' platform with some others from the broad left.

The major strategy of the campaign was quite simple. It was to go to the rank and file membership and call on them to root out the corruptors and demand the total reform of the union. Shortly after this, Dominic Hehir, with the full backing of the broad left, promptly deserted the R&F road and instead took the union to court. The corruption is worse than ever but Hehir is now the London Regional Secretary of UCATT. So much for the broad left acting in the interests of the rank and file.

Construction Safety Campaign

A more prominent example of a 'Building Worker' united front campaign was the Construction Safety Campaign (CSC). This was set up on the initiative of the BW Group as a united front R&F organisation with agreed policies and rules with which to govern and discipline all activities. Or so we thought.

Unfortunately, the CSC with its huge potential for mass picketing and strike action over safety was hijacked by the broad left in the guise of the secretary T O'Brien, chair T Finn and treasurer A Higgins. Definitely no relation whatsoever!

The broad left nature of these three was most clearly and disastrously seen when two workers were killed on the Holborn, MacAlpine Prudential job in the space of one week in November 1989. The CSC put a lobby on the job. I was there and many workers going on to the job told us if the lobby had been a picket they would not have crossed it! I and some others realised we had come as far as we could with lobbies of parliament and coroners courts and building sites. It was now time (as workers were telling us!) to step up the campaign. The logic was inescapable, building workers are not killed in parliament or coroners courts. Lobbies of sites do not effect production and until we started to do this then the employers would go on killing building workers at an appalling and ever increasing rate.

It was now time to implement the CSC policy of "picketing sites where serious injury or death has occurred". In line with this, I took a fairly moderate proposal to the CSC National Committee Meeting of 25th November 1989. I was vice chair of the CSC. I proposed a picket be placed on a site for a couple of hours one morning where a death or deaths had occurred, mainly with a view to stopping transport but also asking workers not to cross. But if a worker told us he would be sacked for not going in then unless we were prepared to put an indefinite picket on until any workers sacked as a result of our picket were reinstated (which we weren't at that time) then we would advise those workers to go in. The limited picket would be a good way of testing the water and if signs were favourable picketing could be stepped up from there.

The vote was 3 for this and 2 against with one abstention. Quite simply, the secretary, chair and treasurer refused to implement this democratic decision and instead started to work to undermine it. Shortly after this these three 'stooges' announced they were going to appoint a fulltime worker, coincidentally who just happened to be one of the three of us who voted to start picketing but had been persuaded to change his mind in the meantime! This appointment was vehemently

opposed on the basis that a R&F organisation must be totally opposed as a principle to the appointment of any and all officials be they in the union or most particularly in a R&F organisation - otherwise as in any appointments system you end up with 'jobs for the boys and girls' and only those favoured by the select few get the position. Many felt the decision was done to ensure that I did not have a chance of getting the job as I would have in an election.

The broad left, including the SWP and Militant, at the 1990 CSC AGM voted for the appointment policy and they also voted against picketing! It was then obvious the CSC had been turned into a toothless broad left bureaucratic machine which was and is being used to enhance the reputations of those on the National Committee in London, with utterly meaningless lobbies of coroners courts and a policy of providing 'jobs for the boys'. As a result, the Building Worker Group and quite a few UCATT branches withdrew their support for the CSC.

We now witness the CSC calling on the state as their main policy plank, i.e. the police, courts and judges to put their friends the employers in jail for killing building workers. Pigs will fly! Even if by some remote possibility a boss or two was put into jail, this would not stop them killing building workers. Killing building workers is actually a very profitable business for these bastards.

All emphasis has now been directed away from the sites where building workers are actually, we say, murdered and instead appeals to the popular front ad nauseam are substituted.

Broad left in union elections

They used to ask those they supported in UCATT elections (mainly for full-time positions) to endorse one or two what they termed progressive policies. (As the TGWU appoint their fulltime officials then they could not have an electoral policy for it!) But in the stampede to the right in recent years the broad left, right, left, right have given up even this pretence and now vote for what in effect is a policy of the

best of a bad bunch. Nae kiddin. They even got this disastrously wrong when they supported A Williams in the election for UCATT General Secretary. He was and is an out-and-out crook, the rest, as they say, is history. Unfortunately for us and the UCATT membership very recent history!

Recently they supported G Brumwell when he was elected as general secretary after Williams. But nothing changes as Brumwell was on the Executive Council who, with evidence to prove it, were guilty of orchestrating the relatively recent ballot rigging and all of the horrendous corruption in the union.

Steel erectors struggle

The London Steel Erectors Stewards Committee who led a wages and conditions (exclusive to steel erectors) movement in the mid to late eighties was another workers' organisation that appeared to be controlled by the rank and file. But in reality, not having a policy of independence from their fulltime trade union officials, they were largely controlled by the London Regional Secretary of the AEU, who in turn was controlled by the General Secretary MacLean, who was controlled by the employer!

Eventually a deal was done by MacLean, some leading stewards were sacked, Joe Harrod the rank and file leader was transferred to the nether regions and the steel erectors brave revolt was effectively over.

I said and felt then, and still do, that the two main ingredients missing from the erectors struggle were their failure to adopt a policy of independence from their full time officials; and to adopt a strategy to involve other building workers in a wages and conditions struggle, thus keying into the all too apparent anger of other site workers at their wages and conditions and present the employers and union officials with one big united front. In not doing this, other building

workers saw the steel erectors struggle as largely elitist and not too much to do with them.

An interesting observation is that I repeatedly asked the CSC secretary and chair, who were in regular contact with the erectors stewards committee, to ask them to send a delegate or delegates to the CSC National Committee. I also asked to be invited to speak to the steel committee. Nothing was done to involve them or to let me speak to them. The word was clearly out. Don't let Higgins near the steel erectors or them near to him - i.e. the broad left word!

'The Shrewsbury trials and jailings were Act One in the ruling class onslaught against trade union rights throughout the 1970s and now into the 1980s. Thatcher's Tory government is giving huge pay rises to the judiciary, police, regular army and reservists, coinciding with proposals to outlaw secondary picketing, weaken the closed shop, cut social security to strikers' families, and other measures. Deaths in police cells have risen alarmingly, SPG squads are used against pickets, the death of Blair Peach has been covered up, juries are being vetted . . . The police-military dictatorship in Ulster is a prototype for use against British workers.

Shrewsbury plays a key role because it not only exposes the conspiracy of the ruling class against our movement — it also shows how the leadership of our movement measures up to the heat of the class confrontation. Perhaps this is why Shrewsbury is such an embarrassment to sections of our movement who would like to forget all about it.'

— Des Warren

Offshore Industrial Liaison Committee (OILC)

Many onshore and offshore construction workers were involved in the struggles of the OILC for safety and the continental shelf agreement in the UK oil industry in the late eighties. Again, a construction workers' organisation, this one with massive immediate potential, economic and political power, adopted the fatally flawed and failed broad left approach. They actually and openly declared they were in existence to restore some faith in official trades unionism among oil workers who had been badly let down by the unions on quite a few occasions in the past. Once this was done, the OILC would hand over the reins to the union officials.

Needless to say, with such an approach, the fulltime officials let them do a job of work in recruiting thousands into the unions. Then when the OILC had done this the officials quite cynically and brutally sold out the oil workers again and the oil workers' brave struggles were over once again. Some of the conditions the fulltime officials settled for are actually worse than the ones the workers were struggling against!

It is also worth mentioning that the OILC Standing Committee, which ran the struggle, was not elected by anyone and was therefore largely self appointed. There were no democratic elections to control the conduct of these OILC officials, rank and file at that! No delegate conferences took place to enable the rank and file, and it was supposed to be a rank and file organisation, to decide policy, rules or constitution.

Particularly crucial here was that there was no policy of defiance of the anti-union laws. Thus, when these were used against the occupations of the rigs (undoubtedly the highpoint of the oil workers' struggle) the OILC Standing Committee and leader Roddie MacDonald completely capitulated and called off the occupations.

I had written a few articles on behalf of the Building Worker Group in their rank and file paper 'The Blowout' and was in quite close touch with two of the Standing Committee. As soon as the occupations took place the OILC issued an order "no more rigs were to be occupied!" I argued with those I knew:- every f'ing rig in the North Sea should be occupied and oil construction workers onshore should picket the many oil-related building site onshore!

The OILC quite recently and very bureaucratically declared itself an 'official' union for oil workers (shades of the EPIU), no doubt to promote the careers of the select few and is in effect a very junior and unofficial partner of the TUC, who have still not recognised it. Once they do, then oil workers will need another workplace-based, this time R&F Organisation. Once more, a workers' struggle has been squandered and sacrificed on the altar of the broad left/official approach to class struggle and oblivion!



The Unions in Construction

The broad left's much bigger brothers. I quote Des Warren, the jailed 'Shrewsbury picket', who in his book "Key to my Cell", when writing on his attitude to the trade union bureaucracy and how he saw their role in the struggle for their release, said: "You have to crawl over the trade union officials to get at the employers. Yes we put demands on the trade union officials, but in the meantime praise the lord and pass the ammunition". Quite a healthy attitude to trade union officials.

However, I go in advance of Des and state: "nowadays you have to crawl over the broad left to get at the fulltime trade union officials and they won't let you near the employers." We have to choose another route!

It's a complete waste of time putting demands on fulltime union officials and the TUC for such as Des Warren was asking, as we know that this bureaucracy will capitulate and sell out workers in struggle especially when the law or the threat of it is used.

We should take our R&F demands and campaigns, as should all workers in struggle, directly to rank and file workers and trade unionists in their workplaces, the workplace and not the union being the most basic requisite, because the point of production is the only place workers have real economic power. Workplace sovereignty, control over production - only this can enable them to win all out and difficult struggles against the employers, the courts and the fulltime trade union officials who always collaborate with the employers and courts in these situations. Yes, workers need to be continually recruited into the unions and workplace struggles and campaigns are the best way to do this!

Also it is surely now manifestly obvious that no meaningful battles or advances can be won unless workers are prepared to fight and defy the fulltime trade union bureaucracy as well as all the other forces arraigned against them.

However, parallel with this, I feel we must mount and support campaigns for the total reform and reclamation of all unions in construction (and everywhere else for that matter) lock, stock, rule book and barrel from the bottom up. Undoubtedly the only way to do this is with militant R&F site/workplace organisation, policies and action. We rightly urge workers to join the unions. When we do so surely we then have a duty to tell them the state the unions are in and urge them to put the unions under workers' control. Make them subject to workers' democracy and no other - because, rest assured, without democratic workers' unions there can be no real workplace/site democracy and vice versa! It is only when unions are under democratic workers' control that we will be able to really control the conduct of union officials. Given the present grossly undemocratic and corrupt state and nature of the unions we cannot trust, or rely upon, any full time TU Officials. Why?

Building Worker

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WILLIAMS

SELLS

OUT

(AGAIN)

UCATT

The national UCATT full time machinery is proven to be corrupt to the core. The same is true of many of the regional ones as well. Unfortunately, some parts of the rank and file have also been corrupted by this. This corruption is being covered up by a conspiracy of silence by the broad left, right and centre. Look at what's happening to 'The UCATT Inquiry'. Most of the corrupt national officials were voted into office on a broad left ticket - as were many local ones also!

Take A Williams, the ex-general secretary, Charlie Kelly, J Henry and G Brumwell of the last, totally and proven to be corrupt Executive Council. They were all voted into office with broad left support. G Brumwell is now the UCATT General Secretary; G Kelly is on the present Executive Council; J Flavin, of the broad left and present Executive Council, has been accused of corruption; Dominic Hehir, broad left and of High Court infamy, has done so many unprincipled somersaults that he more resembles a circus acrobat than a UCATT regional official - apologies to acrobats everywhere! Flavin and that Executive Council got their comeuppance as was detailed earlier in the section headed 'Update on Corruption.'

Some say that G Brunwell was not guilty of corruption. We remind all who read this that covering up for corruption and throwing your lot in with severely discredited executive committee members in an attempt to save them is corrupt in itself and makes G. Brumwell equally guilty. Or like Pontius Pilate do we have the washing of hands?

TGWU

Before anyone says "Ah, but the TGWU is not as bad" - for starters they do not even elect their regional officials. This is a gross corruption and dereliction of democracy. To my knowledge and that of quite a few others, all TGWU construction regional organisers and national officials have done, and are doing, dirty deals as much as their UCATT counterparts. I've some personal experience of being brutally sold

out by Henderson, O'Neill, Blenerhasset and Crase in the Laings Lock Out in 1986. To my knowledge they are all still with the TGWU.

EETPU (now AUEE)

Enough said about EETPU fulltime officials and their activities. But we must go to the rank and file of what is now the electrical section of the AEEU and appeal for them to join the struggle on site for the democratisation of their union and the industry.

Union Elections

Finally, all rank and file workers' organisations need a policy on union elections. They should support only those candidates who openly and in writing support the policies of the rank and file or R&F organisation. No ifs, no buts - completely, unequivocally!

The broad left strategy is a proven, complete and utter disaster and can never represent the interests of rank and file workers. We should have no truck with this method. We should call on them to join us in a genuine united front Rank and File Organisation. Tactically workers in a Rank and File Organisation may have to be part of a broad left because of the balance of forces in a particular union or industry. But the broad left will never be a vehicle which frees workers from the shackles of their respective union bureaucracies or the repressive working conditions most people labour under. There always comes a time when workers in a Rank and File Organisation within the broad left will have to choose between becoming an indistinguishable part of that or strike out independently!

The Joint Sites

A ray of hope for building workers and the rank and file in the unions - I repeat the Joint Sites is undoubtedly the most important and significant development in the London building industry since the Laings Lock Out.

A small group of militants keyed into the real anger and frustration felt on site about the cutting of wages, the casual method of employment and the ease with which workers are dismissed as a result, the shitty conditions they have to work in and the total lack of safety on the vast majority of sites and the deaths and serious injuries this gives rise to. The Joint Sites arose from this anger and frustration because some have been prepared to do something where it really matters - ON SITE.

But I state categorically unless the Joint Sites and the majority involved in it learn from the experiences and lessons of the past then it is doomed to repeat the failures of the past. It also has to be openly, clearly and honestly understood that the political battle for the hearts and minds of the majority in the Joint Sites and the much larger and wider audience on site, is on. This is a legitimate part of the democratic process and the debate that are fashioning the Joint Sites and will largely determine what direction it takes and whether it has a chance of success or not. No one can guarantee absolute success but absolute failure is guaranteed unless certain prerequisites are met.

Some Suggested Proposals

In the light of past experience, many outlined in this document, and given today's prevailing circumstances on site and in the unions and in general, it is my opinion that the Joint Sites should consider taking

on board all or some of the following policies, many with future growth and development in mind:

United Front Rank and File Organisation

The Joint Sites should be a genuine open industrial united front Rank and File Organisation, which means decisions on major policy, strategy and tactics should be decided by voting when it is obvious a consensus is not there; where all who are party to the united front organisation will have the right to argue and will then be expected to implement uphold and work for majority decisions. This maximises agreement and is the only way to minimise and counter the different and differing politics and opinions that will be present in such a united front and ensure the differences do not dominate and eventually destroy the organisation. The Joint Sites must also be absolutely independent from the trade union bureaucracies.

Elections

A Rank and File Organisation cannot survive unless it has a policy of total opposition to all forms of appointments of officials, even if called workers sometimes to avoid elections! It must have elections for all officials or workers who serve the organisation in a specific capacity, such as Secretary, Chair, Treasurer, Committee Member, Welfare Organiser, Safety Liaison, Research Worker, Administration Worker, to name but some examples. There can be no dogsbodies in a Rank and File Organisation. All are and must be doing a job of work which enhances the organisation and therefore all in these positions must be subject to democratic control and elections at all times.

Joint Site Committee

A committee comprising Secretary, Chair, Treasurer and at least another couple of delegates to share the organisational and administrative workload should be elected as soon as this is possible. The organisation needs to be democratically centralised also as soon as possible in order to most productively and effectively build, develop and administer the organisation as well as to most certainly cope with the numbers it will attract in the not too distant future - all things being equal.

No organisation which is dealing with a national industry and national unions can become a real industrial force unless it develops into a national, UK-wide, organisation with national and local demands which have to be supported by a majority of site workers eventually if the organisation is to succeed. With this in mind ...

Suggestions for some specific demands

- a) This organisation builds on the sites and localities and within the unions but remains completely independent from the trade union bureaucracies and all political parties and organisations.
- b) For the reform of all trade unions in construction and for these to be brought under the control of the rank and file members of these unions.
- c) Strong democratic site organisation and unionisation. This can only be achieved and guaranteed if all union site representatives are elected by a majority vote of those they represent and are subject to recall, re-election and replacement on the same majority basis at all times.
- d) A deliberate policy of Joint Sites supporters going for stewards positions, including convener or conveners if more than one on site.

- e) Absolute commitment to total safety organisation and consciousness onsite. That means a policy of no accidents of a serious nature and thus no deaths or major injuries.
- f) Pickets on sites where death or serious injuries have occurred.
- g) £10 per hour for a 35 hour week. No wage differentials between craft and general workers.
- h) No wage strike to be settled unless conditions which are part of this are also settled.
- i) The elimination of all bonus schemes in order that workers do not have to take risks or shortcuts on safety to achieve a decent living wage.
- j) Decent working conditions on all jobs, with priority given to such things as canteens, toilet and washing facilities and drying rooms.
- k) Direct employments with the main contractor or management fee company and an end to sub-contractors.
- l) The main contractor or management fee company to be responsible for the payment of all wages defaulted on by any other contractors on site.
- m) A transfer to other sites of the main contractor when work finishes on one job.
- n) Total opposition to the blacklist. Strikes and picketing when this is proven.
- o) Total defiance of any use of the courts or anti-union laws against building workers in struggle for their democratic and trade union rights.
- p) Threats of employers' violence to be met with threats of widespread strikes and picketing.

q) Acts of violence upon employees by employers or their agents to be met with strikes and mass picketing and employers and directors to be made and held personally and physically responsible.

Tactics

Undoubtedly strikes and picketing will be an absolute necessity to achieve a meaningful level of democratic organisation and unionisation in the building industry. This should be largely on a guerrilla basis at present because of the balance of forces. It will also take strikes and picketing to achieve implementation of even some of the demands outlined in this document on a regional and local basis because of the contractual nature of the industry. These should be carefully organised and planned for.

It will take a 'national' strike in the building industry of UK-wide proportions to achieve (inter)national implementation of the demands herein. Such a strike could only be contemplated and take place with any chance of success if the Rank and File Organisation had a national presence and a reasonable amount of national organisation. This presence and organisation can only be built if there is local and regional action and organisation. The word will spread. Pickets will spread the organisation.

Flying pickets, which trade union officials and the bosses prefer to call secondary pickets, will be and are absolutely the key tactical weapon for implementation of all local, regional and (inter)national advances for R&F organisation in the construction industry. Hence, the key need for a policy of defiance of the anti-union laws, which above all are meant to legally prevent flying pickets.

Of course, where possible, workers will expect a Rank and File Organisation to negotiate wage and conditions on site on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. The strike and picketing are workers' strongest reserve weapons for use when negotiations fail. And they are the only ones which will achieve and make sure the employers stick to, a meaningful 'national' agreement and ensure a truly safe industry.

Strengthening your hand



In conclusion

I re-emphasise this document is but a, albeit strong, democratic contribution to the debates and the developments which are taking place in and around the Joint Sites. I honestly think the collective experience and lessons represented in this document can only assist in the progressive development and organisation of the Joint Sites.

I also feel very strongly that the Joint Sites need to go somewhere in the direction outlined in these pages to become the sort of organisation so desperately needed and wanted by building workers, mainly to counter the horrendous state of the industry and unions within it. It is my feeling that the call should go out from the Joint Sites to all who profess to be truly concerned about promoting and fighting for the interests of all building workers, to bury the political sectarianism and the sectional interest of the past and present and to join in one big United Front Rank and File Organisation and movement, which will "agitate, educate and organise", until all our demands and objectives have been met and achieved.

This means unity, organisation and action around the united front policies which will eventually and hopefully be agreed by the Joint Sites. If this is achieved then we will have the first truly (inter)national united front Rank and File Organisation in construction. Employers and trade union officials beware!

Dated - 27.4.92.

Some subsequent developments and the current situation

The discussion document fell on deaf ears as far as the 'leadership' was concerned and unfortunately the Joint Sites ceased to be an industrial force by the end of 1992 and disappeared not long after.

In my opinion, it was sacrificed by what was the glory-hunting populism of the leader of the Joint Sites, who had no idea or plan of how to take it beyond the initial spontaneous and tremendously enthusiastic response of many site workers in London. He was, of course, very ably assisted in this by the "There's nothing beyond spontaneity but the full time officials" attitude of the broad left around him. Once more, a tremendous opportunity to build a mass R&F Organisation and movement around this in the construction industry was squandered and lost by the acolytes of "My union officials right or wrong" creed of industrial struggle and politics.

UCATT fared no better. You'll note Building Worker states changes in personnel alone, be they lay or fulltime, essentially alters nothing. It is policies and the struggles for these which bring real change. How prophetic this was.

The first lay Executive Council (EC) in the history of the union, elected by 87% of the members who voted, replaced the last very corrupt EC and gave great hope to many rank and file union members in the process. The EC Chair is very much on the broad left, which is already proving to be no better than those they replaced and are rapidly going down the same road.

Apart from coming up with no new policies whatsoever to distinguish them from anything we've had in the past, it has been reported that they have extended the contracts of five full time regional officials who should be up for election in June this year.

Extending their contracts is a euphemism for appointing them! Hehir just happens to be one of them. What an affront to democracy. What a dereliction of the union rules which are unequivocally for the election of all regional officials. The TGWU appoint theirs. Do we smell the stench of another predatory takeover attempt by the TGWU bureaucracy?

Worth repeating some of the facts in it. What can you expect when the broad left George Brumwell, a member of the totally corrupt and discredited Executive Council of the infamous A Williams era as well as the next equally corrupt, discredited and eventually removed EC, became UCATT General Secretary during the life of the last EC? He had overseen and overlooked all of their activities and did his damndest to save them at the 1994 National Delegate Conference and clearly threw in his lot with them. And he now oversees and controls the current lay EC?

The National Broad Left meeting in Doncaster on February 10th 1996 voted to support G. Brumwell for re-election as UCATT General Secretary. Believe it or believe it not!

Some in the union say "but we've got to give the new EC a chance". In fact, they have already proved themselves a right bunch of chancers. We ask - what chance do they give union members and building workers being ruthlessly exploited, with the worst working conditions in living memory, sacked at a moment's notice and last but not least seriously injured and a greater proportion of the workforce killed yearly than ever before?

None!

The Struggle Continues

Southwark 'New' Labour Council in London

As I write this, the Building Worker Group is involved in supporting a dispute that two building workers have with Southwark Council Direct Labour Building Works Department, who sacked the workers on 31 October 1995.

To cut a long story short, management singled out John Jones, a brickie and UCATT shop steward who has been a serious thorn in their side for many years and also very relevantly in that of the building works UCATT Convener Steward Tony O'Brien. Management told John he'd have to accept a transfer to a private building contractor named Botes or be sacked. As this is often a management tactic when victimising militant shops stewards, they had to transfer another few workers to make it appear no one was being singled out. One of the other workers, Terry a plumber, took a stand alongside John against the transfers. They also reminded Southwark Council they had a grievance out against the transfer to Botes with the Council.

The Council then came up with most idiotic pieces of management claptrap any of us, and many others, have heard. Believe us we've heard some! They said Botes would deal with their grievances against being transferred to Botes! All this utterly contrary to nationally agreed union/management procedures for dealing with grievances.

O'Brien, the Convener Steward who is on the broad left and Hehir, the UCATT fulltime regional official, who is also on the broad left, and J Rouse, TGWU/EPIU official, then entered the fray and promptly backed the management's sacking of John and Terry and agreeing their grievance procedures should be heard by Botes. There then followed this series of events:

13th November 1995: After the council had ignored a week's ultimatum from the two sacked workers that their grievance procedures should be reinstated in line with the rule book, a picket was put on the Frensham Street DLO Building Works Depot, the largest. The Building Workers Group was asked to support the picket by Terry and Johnny. We did so wholeheartedly. None of the DLO building workers would cross the picket line. O'Brien then severely pressurised them into crossing. A mass meeting was promised for the next day and on this basis the picket was lifted at noon on 13th November. The promise was broken - no mass meeting next day!

20th November 1995: After a week of no movement from the council, another picket was put on to try to force the council's hand. Again, no worker would cross. Again, O'Brien forced them over. To their eternal disgrace and disgustingly, the SWP publicly backed the convener's scabbing.

11th December 1995: The picketing was stepped up that day and a lobby put on the meeting of the London and South East Regional Council of UCATT. The lobby demanded and chanted for a mass meeting - the right to vote and for the reinstatement of the grievance procedures. O'Brien and Hehir were completely opposed to and prevented this.

The lobbyists were told Southwark Council had given UCATT ten days to get the picket off or they would face a high court injunction. Undoubtedly this was meant to push the union firmly into line with the council, O'Brien and Hehir. We reminded the regional council, and the General Secretary who was lurking about in the building, of the 'Laings Lock Out'. The regional council went completely against O'Brien and Hehir by deciding a mass meeting must be held and to call on Southwark Council to reinstate the grievance procedures. What a victory. The power of the picket! Without the picket John and Terry would have been long gone!

20th December 1995: The mass meeting massively supported reinstatement of the grievance procedure. Such was the feeling of the meeting, the TGWU/EPIU official J Rouse went straight to his office and sent a letter to Southwark Council requesting reinstatement of the procedures! The council are still digging their heels in and refusing to budge. A recall mass meeting should take place to decide on the type of industrial action which will be necessary to move the council. A strike and picketting of course.

16th February 1996: On this day a meeting of London and South East Regional Council of UCATT completely reversed their decision of December 11th and told John Jones that, after taking legal advice, they had decided that John (and that means Terry as well) would have to accept the transfer of his grievance to Botes - who would decide the outcome. What treachery!

Legal advice is a euphemism for "we have just brutally and cynically sold you out but we are using this legal claptrap to hide our shame". Incidentally the chair of the Regional Council is broad left C. Murphy.

If we thought O'Brien couldn't sink any lower than his utterly reactionary and unprincipled conduct on the picket lines, we were wrong. He enlisted the political support of his allies in the WRP/Workers Press. A letter by Dot Gibson of the WRP was printed in the Workers Press of 2nd December 1995. In this she accuses the two sacked workers and the Building Worker of mounting a "Fraudulent, sectarian 'picket line'" and accuses us of "this provocative action" with no real knowledge of what the picket is about and what provoked it.

In Workers Press of 9th December an anonymous article continued the poisonous attack and asks: "are we an anti-trade union group or what?" This is called smear by speculation. In the 16th December issue of the paper is the daddy of all attacks and smears on us in an article by T O'Brien where he is given the two middle pages to do this.

Smears in General

There is nothing new in O'Brien and the Workers Press/WRP smearing us. They follow in a long line of all sorts of dishonourable wretches and organisations who have done this, usually anonymously, down the years. Since the formation of the Building Worker Group and paper there has been a continual whispering campaign against the Group and myself in UCATT, with echoes in the TGWU and much further afield.

I've been smeared as everything from a police spy to an agent provocateur, to even being on "Moscow Gold" before the collapse of the USSR and presumably they ran out of money!

From time to time smears go from whispers to very public and reached a climax of semen like proportions just before the 1994 UCATT National Delegate Conference when an anonymous 4 page bulletin appeared smearing us as a CIA front organisation, and naming four of us in the bulletin. This was quite widely distributed in UCATT. Coincidentally, myself and another Building Worker comrade just happened to be delegates at that conference!

Such poisonous attacks are very unpleasant and also affect on occasion our families. But one of the things we have learned over the years is that the more of a threat you become to the popular front, and most particularly the trade union bureaucracy within it, then this is usually at the time when we are directly challenging them and reaching a much wider rank and file audience than usual. It is then that the bureaucratic smear machine goes into overdrive.

It also proves just how much they fear what we are doing and also the incorruptibility we represent in the midst of all the bureaucratic and political corruption and degeneration of trade union and general democracy that has taken place since Thatcher came in 1979. Now with the Stakeholder General himself, Tony Blair, promising to continue it, we are the living proof that new realism, be it left, right or centre can be resisted. Basic trade union and working class principles can

and must be defended in the face of whatever adversity. I think this is what they hate us for more than anything else and the more they do the better the job we must be doing! We have kept faith with the only constituency that really matters - the rank and file!

We have news for the employers, the stakeholders, the broad right, left and centre, the popular front - the more you throw at us the more we'll come back at you. And don't forget the terrible exploitation and working conditions on site, which gave birth and life to every movement of building workers this century, are still there - the hatred, frustration and terrible anger building workers feel about this still exists. The touchflame is still waiting to be lit. Perhaps in the not too distant future the 'Building Worker Group' may carry the torch of freedom from the bureaucracy which ignites this.

February 1996.

Stop Press: *It is proposed to use this pamphlet and a recent pamphlet on A Case for Trade Union Rank and File Resistance - The Hackney Story to host a debate on the issue of Rank and File in the middle of 1996. It is intended to create a network of Rank and File groups to link workers in and out of unions, across workplaces and branches, to create the conditions whereby workers can ultimately destroy the capitalist system and replace it with one based on their needs not profit.*

Colin Roach Centre/Resistance Statement
February 1996.

also available:

A CASE FOR TRADE UNION RANK AND FILE RESISTANCE

The Hackney story



Produced by the Colin Roach Centre
£1.50

affiliate to the Colin Roach Centre

The following trade union branches are affiliated to the Colin Roach Centre:-

- Hackney TGWU/ACTSS
- Hackney and Tower Hamlets CPSA
- RMT Midland District Council
- TGWU Hotel and Catering
- North London TGWU 1/1312 Textile
- Newham UNISON
- Newham CPSA
- MSF Housing
- Hackney NUT
- Haringey UNISON
- UNISON University College, London

The affiliation rate is £25 which includes regular bulletins, details of events and an opportunity to get involved in our practical day-to-day work. We are constantly seeking invitations to speak at trade union branch meetings. Please let us know if you are interested in a speaker on any aspect of our work.

The Colin Roach Centre/Resistance

This pamphlet has been printed by the Colin Roach Centre, which is a political centre in north-east London. It was set up by Hackney Community Defence Association and Hackney Trade Union Support Unit almost three years ago. The name of the centre commemorates the life of Colin Roach who was killed in Stoke Newington Police Station in January 1983. Colin's family have agreed to allow us to use his name as a symbol of the continuing struggle for justice. The Centre is run and paid for by its members as well as donations from sympathetic trade union branches.

In addition to our trade union work, members of the Colin Roach Centre are involved in advising workers about their rights, rallying support for the struggles of Kurdish and Turkish people, collecting aid for Workers' Convoys to Bosnia, defending the victims of police crime, harassment and violence, supporting victimised workers, organising speaking tours for strikers and responding to requests from the press and television.

Members are also involved in local and national campaigns which oppose immigration controls and against the growth of racism and fascism. Recently some members took part in our first delegation to the north of Ireland.

Resistance

Members of the Colin Roach Centre, along with others in different parts of the country, set up a new political organisation in October 1995 called Resistance. An agreed list of policies and a working constitution were adopted. A programme of practical work in 1996 has been set up, including plans to open centres in other areas. Anyone who is interested in working with us and/or becoming a member of Resistance should write or telephone us.

Pamphlets available from the Colin Roach Centre

- ★ *A peoples' account of the Hackney anti-poll tax demonstration on March 8th 1990* - eye witness accounts. Printed 1990. £2 a copy
- ★ *A crime is a crime is a crime* - A short report on police crime in Hackney. Printed November 1991. £1 or £7 for 10 copies.
- ★ *Fighting the Lawmen* - An examination of Stoke Newington Police and drug dealing, through the eyes of four local people wrongly convicted of offences. September 1992. £1 or £7 for 10 copies.
- ★ *On the border of a police state* - A campaigning pamphlet on three government reports on the police and a strategy for challenging the emergence of a police state. £2 each or £12 for 10 copies. September 1993.
- ★ *Who Killed Patrick Quinn - the framing of Malcolm Kennedy*. A miscarriage of justice in which an innocent man is fitted up so that a police killing can be kept quiet. £3 a copy or £20 for 10. December 1994.
- ★ *Anti-Nazi-League - A critical examination of the periods 1977 - 1981/2 and 1992-95*. By active anti-fascists. July 1995. £1 a copy/£7 for 10.
- ★ *Report on Delegation to Ireland in August 1995 by members of the Colin Roach Centre* - Report on events in Derry and Belfast September 1995. £1 a copy.
- ★ *A Case for Trade Union Rank and File Resistance - the Hackney Story* - Putting forward the case for rank and file control of the unions November 1995. £1.50 or £10 for 10.

Please add 15% to cover postage and packing.

Also - *The Constitution and Policies of Resistance* £1

£1.50

RANK AND FILE OR BROAD LEFT:
DEMOCRACY versus BUREAUCRACY

A short history of the Building Worker Group

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